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ABSTRACT

Administrators can improve their school's custodial program by following steps that increase productivity, reduce costs, and provide long-term benefits of higher cleanliness standards. Administrators should work toward improved building cleanliness by insisting on a school board policy that establishes objectives for the custodial department. Principals have many duties and managing the custodial staff is often relagated to lower priority than providing "instructional leadership." A formula is needed for custodial staff allocations and should include factors such as number of children and adults using the building and extent of extracurricular and community activities. Custodial job descriptions should include specific task assignments. Responsibilities should encompass inspections, preventive maintenance, regulation compliance, inventory maintenance, and emergencies. A daily schedule stating tasks, tools, and time allotments should be supplemented with weekly and seasonal schedules. Job enrichment for custodians can be achieved by expanding the custodian's role to include care of flower beds and shrubs, window replacement, and preventive maintenance, such as periodic oiling of motors, changing of furnace filters, repairing leaky faucets and replacing motor belts. Recognition of custodians promotes morale and can be accomplished by issuing custodial uniforms or even ordering business cards for them. (CJH)

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Some things are like the weather: Everyone complains about them, but no one does anything.

The cleanliness of school facilities tends to fall in that category. But unlike the weather, which is virtually beyond human control, there are ways to improve the general upkeep of schools.

Especially in this era of education reform, however, the subject of custodial efforts seems particularly mundane, even unimportant. Education leaders likely would say, "It's what goes on in the classroom between teacher and student that counts, not whether the floor has been mopped."

It is no wonder that custodial departments across the country suffer from benign neglect. But, if you want to win new friends *and* keep your old ones, how your schools look to those who work in them and those who visit them can be as important as your instructional program and the quality of your teachers. Board members need to know what direction and support the board must provide if that goal is to be achieved.

Root of problem

Principals have plenty of important things to do. Managing the custodial staff usually is relegated to a lower priority than providing "instructional leadership."

There are exceptions, of course. When dignitaries are scheduled for a visit, principals scramble to locate the custodian for a quick once-over or to hide some boxes that have been sitting in the hallway for weeks. Most schools will shine at least once a year: on parent back-to-school night. And, there always is the cafeteria spill that instantly transforms the school custodian into the man or woman of the hour.

In these situations, when adminstrators pay attention to their custodians, the results usually are satisfactory. The trouble with this typical rush-around approach is that there probably will be no lasting effects.

Consider the anxiety created when that white-glove inspector-type relative comes for a visit to your home. While there may be some quick straightening up to do, most people won't panic because the home is maintained regularly in a generally acceptable fashion. But the same cannot always be said about school buildings.

Principals, the people who manage schools, usually come up through the ranks of classroom teaching. Consequently, they have no direct experience with the duties of the custodial staff. Graduate courses on "buildings and grounds" do not adequately cover these assignments either. Without direct experience or knowledge, it is easy to understand why administrators spend their energies elsewhere.

What then can be done to improve the custodial program?

Plenty!

Here are some proven steps for increasing productivity, reducing costs, and providing the long-term benefit of recognizing the value of higher standards of cleanliness to the schools.

Promote the need

To begin, create an awareness of the need for improved building cleanliness. The message should be addressed primarily to principals and custodians. And the message should come in the form of a school board policy—not simply a memorandum resulting from a board member's comment that buildings are dirty.

The policy should establish the parameters and objectives for the custodial department such as "maintain a neat, clean, attractive, and functional environment as an aid to learning." Such a policy can serve both as a motivator for change and as a benchmark for assessment.

For a period of time, progress reports to the board should be required. Ultimately, the results should speak for themselves.

A new or revised board policy will transfer the impetus for specific change to all principals—the front-line troops who will carry it out. Principals, however, may be the hardest group to convince of the sincerity of a systemwide effort to upgrade custodial performance.

Although they complain about custodians as much as anyone, they often don't know how to get better performance from custodians and they are concerned that this task will fall on their shoulders with little or no assistance. Therefore, once the need for improvement has been communicated, principals will need some instruction and support before they can be expected to commit themselves to making it work.

Staffing allocations

It is a lot easier to determine how many people it takes to keep a school clean than how many angels can dance on the head of a pin—and it's critical to know before demands are made.

The tendency is to respond to requirements for improved cleanliness with demands for more custodians. The simplest approach to overcoming this knee-jerk reaction may be simply to an-

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nounce that no more custodial positions will be created. Then, hold the line. But such a directive will be effective only if people truly agree that existing staff is sufficient to do the job.

An alternative means is to use a consistent formula or set of criteria for assigning custodial staff. Most recognized approaches use square footage per custodian as the basic criterion.

Research by the late E.B. Sessions of Ohio State University used a measure of 660 square feet of cleaning for every 20 minutes of a custodian's time, for example. Research cited in an article in *American School and University* (March 1985) came up with 14,850 square feet as the amount of space one full-time (eight-hour) custodian could clean.

Other factors to consider in developing a formula are: number of children and adults who use the building; extent of extracurricular and community activities; type of heating system; degree of difficulty.

Also, consider different shifts when developing a formula. A night-shift custodial staff should be able to work faster than one working while people are still in the building. Applying a systematic formula may reveal that part-time custodians will be adequate to get the job done in some buildings. Work schedules could be staggered to reduce fraternization or shifts could be overlapped to increase team work.

Keep in mind, however, that a few simple criteria make for a more acceptable and defensible formula than one that is more complex.

Job descriptions

When custodians try to perform their jobs without benefit of clear and adequate job descriptions that detail their responsibilities, the potential exists for interpersonal conflct over who is to do what. School systems that operate without custodial job descriptions are more prone to involvement as defendants in court cases.

Job descriptions should include, at a minimum:

- specific task assignments;
- responsibilities for daily or routine inspections;
- responsibilities for conducting preventive maintenance;
- responsibilities for notifying principals or others regarding hazards;
- compliance with regulatory requirements;
- maintenance of inventory;
- handling emergencies.

Annually, each custodian and principal should be given a copy of the job description for review.

Many custodians generate their own work schedules without regard to anything but habit. Often, a written daily work schedule defining duties has been compiled, but is forgotten or ignored.

A documented daily schedule stating the particular tasks, tools, and time allotments is basic to custodial program management. Daily schedules should be supplemented with weekly and seasonal schedules for each building so that a comprehensive custodial plan will be apparent. Ideally, some type of analysis, such as a time and motion study, would contribute to the content of a good work schedule.

Supplies and equipment

In most situations, custodians can accomplish their standard tasks with as few as one dozen cleaning and repair items. That's interesting, you may be thinking, but what difference should it make to school board members?

Just consider that whenever the range of supplies is increased, the chance for duplication and waste rises accordingly. The larger the school system, the more important it is to standardize supplies and save money. Also, the exact supplies required can depend on the quality and quantity of hand and power equipment available.

When judging equipment needs, an important consideration is the effect on personnel needs. Without sufficient and appropriate tools, labor costs—the most costly ingredient of a "clean school" program—will soar. But unlike supplies, the best tool for each task may be different, and the number of tools may increase in a cost-effective program.

A survey can reveal the current inventory of equipment and surfaces and what some of the shortages might be. And when making judgments about facilities improvements such as carpeting, consider what it will take in equipment and manpower to maintain the improvement in addition to its potential benefits to the educational and work environment.

Often, the value of new or upgraded equipment can be increased through time sharing; productivity can be enhanced while costs are reduced. Because the initial cost of new equipment may be prohibitive, a long-term purchase plan could be the logical approach. Based upon estimated life expectancies for each piece of equipment, a long-term replacement cycle for each item can be formulated.

Responsive vendors

The least expensive brands of supplies or equipment are not always the best. Long-term quality and cost savings should not be sacrificed for immediate savings. To paraphrase a famous advertisement, "You can pay now or you can pay later."

The way to find out about the true value of supplies and equipment is to keep records over time about quantities consumed, repairs made, complaints, etc. In addition, when selecting vendors, specific performance criteria should be included in bids or sales agreements. Minimum performance criteria should include:

- providing training in the use of products and in maintaining, repairing, or replacing equipment parts;
- carrying inventory of all necessary supplies;
- updating state-of-the-art information;
- providing reasonable on-call availability.

Reliable vendors can contribute significantly to the productivity of the custodial department.

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Inservice programs

The scope of the inservice curriculum for custodians should range from ensuring thorough understanding of job descriptions and schedules to proper use of equipment and supplies. In addition, they need to know emergency procedures, including how to use fire fighting equipment. Ideally, a custodial supervisor would spend one week for initial onsite training when a new custodian begins working.

Inservice programs for substitutes, who frequently move up to permanent status, can affect immediate results, as well as develop better employees long term. If substitutes are guided early in proper techniques and work habits, their chances for success when assigned to permanent positions will be enhanced.

Principals also need specialized inservice. They are the daily contact people for custodians, and they need to be aware of approved procedures and practices.

Job enrichment

All employees want to have a sense of pride in their work. For custodians, this usually means that they take pride in the appearance of their work site as well as in their impact on the school system. One way to achieve this goal is to expand the custodian's traditional role through job enrichment.

For example, many custodians are not responsible for the school exterior except for picking up litter. Some schools have successfully added care of the lawn to the building custodians' responsibilities instead of relying on a transient ground crew. Some have limited this responsibility to care of flower beds or shrubs around the school entrance which can be a source of pride for the custodian.

Other areas for job enrichment are preventive maintenance, window replacement, and energy management. When preventive maintenance is sparse or nonexistent, equipment costs increase. Many basic preventive maintenance tasks can be performed by trained building custodians such as periodic oiling of motors, changing of furnace filters, repairing leaky faucets, replacing motor belts, and immediately reporting malfunctions to specially trained people. Checkoff lists can be helpful in monitoring such activities.

Conserving energy has been heavily publicized since the 1960s. Custodians can be trained in techniques that foster energy conservation such as keeping lights and heat turned off in unused areas and regulating the flow of water. Such frugal use of energy and utilities should be noticed by the principal and can serve as another source of pride for custodians.

Custodians can contribute considerably to controlling and eliminating health and safety hazards such as fire, insects and rodents, dampness, obstructions, etc. Also, well-trained custodians can be front-line soldiers in campaigns to reduce vandalism, and theft.

Keep in mind, however, that a gradual progression of increased responsibilities—accompanied by appropriate training—is recommended over adding multiple tasks simultaneously. These should be opportunities, not burdens. Also, plan to recognize custodians for the positive results of their efforts.

Supervision

To maintain high levels of cleanliness, supervision is necessary ("You can't expect what you don't inspect.").

Typically, principals have daily supervision duties. A useful technique, regardless of who is the supervisor, is "spot supervision." This method consists of regular, staggered and/or unscheduled visits, often during nonschool hours, to inspect the results of work assignments. Forms should be developed for recording the findings of these checks, thus building a documented historical record from which patterns can be determined. Deficiencies, as well as recognition for jobs well done, can be noted.

Custodians who are performing well should be formally recognized with citations. Public recognition programs can result in high morale and set up positive role models for other custodians. Those who are deficient should be informed of areas needing improvement, given an opportunity and assistance to improve, but dismissed if improvement does not occur. Contrary to popular opinion, dismissing unproductive custodians will have a positive effect on morale in the long run.

Other ideas

How to motivate employees often is the most elusive element of good management. Finding the right motivator for each situation and each employee is essential.

In a recent visit to a Canadian school system, the extraordinary cleanliness of the schools was noted. No obvious cause, including custodial staffing allocations and expenditures, could be identified. The only difference that seemed to stand out was that every custodian wore a necktie.

Some school systems issue uniforms to their custodians for the same reason that these custodians (only male custodians were seen) wore neckties: to instill personal pride in their appearance.

A high school principal in Washington uses a different approach. She orders a supply of business cards for each custodian as a means of adding status to the position.

Why do some try such innovative approaches? Because they are convinced that clean buildings are powerful incentives for learning and public support. Those are incentives that should not be ignored. ■

Board responsibilities for support services

Given the maxim that board members adopt policy and administrators implement it, you might think that custodial services is an area that school boards can virtually ignore. But that is not necessarily true.

As explained in this excerpt from *Becoming a Better Board Member* (NSBA, 1982), school boards have a "hands on" role in support services that includes:

- *Approval of policy* which establishes, expands, curtails, or ends a program.
- *Annual budget approval* which includes judgments about the nature and future of funded programs.
- *Supervisor control* through approval, revision, or disapproval of job descriptions for top-level supervisors or directors of programs. Many boards also exert control through approval of candidates recommended for employment.
- *Control of directions* through establishment of plans, goals, and priorities for the future operation of the schools.
- *Oversight and evaluation of programs.* The board receives reports from the administration on progress and problems. It also reviews and evaluates programs and staff implementation of policy. The board also provides a major communication channel for reactions from parents and citizens about the performance of the school system.